MG Article: RTFM

by Douglas Kiang

RTFM or "Read The F_____ Manual." (These cryptic letters, often seen on the Internet and online services, are often added at the end of a terse and often quite blunt message admonishing some poor soul for having the gall to ask a question such as: "How do you start the engines?")

Eric Dennutz never reads game manuals. "I buy a game to play the game; I'm not going to want to sit down and read a book about playing the game," he says. He is not alone in this attitude. While few statistics exist as to the number of users who actually do take the time to "RTFM", an informal poll suggests that many game developers feel extensive manuals and documentation are neither appreciated nor desired by the majority of game players. However, there are some companies who do put a lot of effort into designing the manuals and documentation. While these materials cannot make a terrible game great, they can definitely make a great game terrific and often significantly enhance the overall experience.

Manuals, documentation, quick reference cards, pinball flippers, comic books…
Software packages have accumulated a wealth of extra material by the time they reach your Macintosh. So just how important is all of this stuff? Does an extensive manual introduce you to the game, or give away some of its secrets? We talked to a number of Macintosh game developers and game players to find out just how important the "FM" really is.

The READ ME Factor

Certainly, once you have that brand new game in your hands, for many people there is an immediate impulse to rip the plastic wrap off, toss any and all written materials aside, and leap right into the midst of the game. Still, for many others, after a few hours of frantic game play, an equal amount of time spent perusing all of the various maps, charts, anecdotes, handbooks, and other related documentation is equally enjoyable.

We have all seen examples of software packages in which a really lousy game has been "padded" with all sorts of filler. In cases like these, the fanciest paint job still won't make a crummy engine run better (but boy, does it look great while it's sitting in the driveway!… or stuck on the dealer's shelf.) However, there are many cases in which an already excellent program is made superior by virtue of a well-written manual.

Filling or Frosting?

"A good game sparks discussion," points out Chris Larsen of Changeling Software (Pax Imperia). The games forums on America Online and CompuServe are bustling with activity and discussion about many different types of games, from Maelstrom to Civilization. Often the most direct way for programmers themselves to comment on their own games is in the documentation. But does anyone actually read game manuals? Mary Radlhammer of Boston explains: "Usually the first thing I do when I get a game is flip through the manual. It gives me a good feel for what I'm getting myself into. If the manual is fun to read, I may even [read it] cover to cover!"

Another Macintosh user, Peter Hirschmann of Tucson, puts it: "The quality of the package and documentation goes a long way not only in giving the player a first impression of the game but also the commitment of the company to supporting the Macintosh market." He goes on to mention Electronic Arts (Chuck Yeager's Air Combat) and Delta Tao (Ultimate Solitaire) as being particularly entertaining and informative. Delta Tao is well-known for their pithy, witty manuals that include not only game instructions, but short essays and viewpoints on a variety of issues such as copy protection, Taoist philosophy, and even their favorite and not-so-favorite games.

"The most important feature of a manual is that it gets read in the first place," says Delta Tao's Joe Williams. "My goal is to make sure that people enjoy reading the manual as much as possible. Also, that way our tech support doesn't get bombarded with questions that are answered in the manual." He adds that an entertaining manual can add quite a bit to your overall enjoyment of the game.

Some games clearly require more documentation than others. However, most people agree that the best way to learn any game is to play the game yourself. As a result, many arcade games ship with minimal installation instructions, perhaps a bit of on-line help, and let the game player discover the rest. More complicated games, such as strategy games and simulations, may require a written tutorial or something along those lines. But beyond the installation instructions and the basic rules of the game, what else can (or should) be added?

Velocity's Spectre and Spectre Supreme, for example, are simple enough to learn that a manual is not necessary, but the manuals also include assorted goodies such as a "cyberpunk novella" that sets the stage for the game and puts it into an imaginative context. Those who skip out on reading the manual (or worse, those who have "lost" the manual) are missing out on a very cool part of the game.

More Bang for the Buck?

After the initial rush of playing a new game for the very first time is over, many people have a natural desire to learn more. Some might read through the manual to discover certain key combinations or shortcuts, while others may peruse online services to discuss tips and strategies or to seek help on a certain level. With this in mind, some companies include tips and strategies in their own game manuals that will help players complete their next mission, or advance beyond the first ten levels. Providing a comprehensive game manual really accommodates those game players who really want to delve into the game and learn all of the different options, no matter how obscure. It is true that some people never use the manual to learn the game, but then again some people have used Microsoft Word for years knowing only the commands Cut and Paste.

Manual Labor

Companies such as Maxis provide excellent manuals with their products that go beyond the simple instruction manual to offer tips and strategies for playing the game, and delve into

the historical and sociological backgrounds of their games. SimCity 2000's manual even contains a section devoted to artistic interpretations of urban life through poems and drawings. This incorporation of history, art, and sociology bridges the gap between computer simulation and real life, which is the very function of their products in the first place. Does all of this extra material directly improve your ability to play the game? Not necessarily. Does it enhance your understanding of the origin of the game, resulting in a greater appreciation of the game? Maybe.

On the other hand, some game developers feel that most users don't read manuals anyway, so they instead put their efforts into developing a clean interface that requires little in the way of prep reading; any information the gamer needs is gleaned from playing the game itself, or from on-line help that reveals the functions of certain objects only after the player discovers them on his or her own. "If the game is well-designed," Williams points out, "it shouldn't require a manual at all."

Another example of this is the arcade game "Space Madness." John Milnes of High Risk Ventures explains: "We've seen from our own experiences and from our customers that most people either lose the manual or don't care much about the manual… we figure most people want to figure it out on their own anyway since it's an arcade game." He goes on to add that an electronic manual is much easier to update and is more environmentally sound.

Ideally, it would be wonderful to see products that make the average game player just as eager to read the manual as to play the game, but the bottom line is simply that a good game is a good game, regardless of the manual. No manual in the world can make up for a crummy game, and if a game is well-designed, people shouldn't have too much of a problem figuring things out for themselves. Still, if a manual is well-written and fun to read, many people will take the time (maybe after having played a few games) to spend some time with it. If it offers something more than what a player might get from simply playing through the game, then people really are getting that much more for their hard-earned dollar.